

**LOCAL 721**



**SEIU**

SERVICE EMPLOYEES  
INTERNATIONAL UNION, CTW, CLC

November 5, 2013

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**Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection**  
**In the care of Chairman David Sanders**  
**500 West Temple Street, Room B50**  
**Los Angeles, CA, 90012**

Dear Chairman Sanders and Distinguished Panel of Commissioners,

We write to thank you for the time and consideration the Commission devoted on Tuesday to hear from children's social workers of Los Angeles County directly. We are committed to reforming the Department of Children and Family Services, and deeply appreciate your invitation to return on November 15 to further testify about our daily concerns, challenges, and hopes for ensuring child safety.

In addition to hearing our views, we believe the Commission's efforts to understand and improve the current system are greatly enhanced by listening to the voices of other youth and family direct service providers such as in-home child care professionals, early educators, and community-based organizations. They serve as effective partners with social workers to identify and protect at-risk children, and coordinate across a network of local agencies to help bridge the gap in resources and funding to serve vulnerable populations. Our collaborations have produced effective, evidence-based approaches that measurably improve the quality and range of services available to families in crisis and children affected by trauma. Thus, we appreciate and applaud the Commission's efforts to hear from these stakeholders as well.

Our vision of a transformed DCFS and foster care system includes urgent implementation of the best practices we have developed with external advocacy partners. However, these approaches will only succeed if fortified by the addition of 1,400 qualified, trained social workers. As you are keenly aware, current caseload levels more than double and often triple state and national standards. But put into further perspective, as we reported Tuesday, that means that over 2,200 children in need were never seen or assigned a case manager last month. Currently, only 22 percent of DCFS employees directly oversee children's welfare and safety – a figure that must increase dramatically to prevent and reduce child neglect and abuse in the County.

<http://www.seiu721.org>

□ 1545 Wilshire Blvd. Ste 100 • Los Angeles CA 90017-9664 • Tel (213) 368-8660 • Fax (213) 360-8040  
□ 8177 River Crest Dr. Ste B • Riverside CA 92507 • Tel (951) 571-7700 • Fax (951) 653-8310  
□ 340 S. Farrell Dr. Ste A104 • Palm Springs CA 92262 • Tel (760) 322-7191 • Fax (760) 322-7161  
□ 2472 Eastman Ave. Ste 30 • Ventura CA 93003-5774 • Tel (805) 650-4420 • Fax (805) 644-7843

□ 933 Castillo St. • Santa Barbara CA 93101 • Tel (805) 963-4411 • Fax (805) 962-9643  
□ 1651 E. 4th St. Ste 120 • Santa Ana CA 92701-5143 • Tel (714) 338-5201 • Fax (714) 543-2871  
□ 42231 6th St W. Ste 201 • Lancaster CA 93534 • Tel (661) 802-0977 • Fax (661) 974-7914

The children's social workers of Los Angeles County believe in putting "Children First." That is our name for the policy we proposed to the Board of Supervisors and in contract talks with DCFS Director Philip Browning. It's a simple, actionable plan: continue to recruit and train 35 workers a month until we reach our goal.

If enacted by January 2014, DCFS would have 420 trained social workers in the field by the end of the year at a cost of just under \$47 million. Although that is a fraction of the children's social workers needed to put child safety first, it is a roaring start that would put us over the halfway mark by the following year, and puts us on a timeline to achieve our ultimate goal by early spring 2017 – and it is clearly within the County's budget. To that end, we encourage the Commission to examine the County's current fiscal position with a trained eye, focusing on money budgeted for capital expenditures over the last decade that was never spent.

In the last five years, the County over-appropriated for capital expenditures from its General Fund by an average of nearly \$1 billion annually, a practice acknowledged in each of the last four Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports.<sup>1</sup> The County treats these over-appropriations as one-time events to "ensure the continuity of projects," but in the same breath admits in the newly released 2013-14 budget that reductions in capital projects spending – money which has rolled over year after year – helped the County resolve deficits during the recession and recovery.

We have encouraged the Board of Supervisors to spend what is needed out of the County's robust reserve of \$2.6 billion<sup>2</sup> to ensure child safety. We strongly encourage the members of the Commission to examine the County's budget themselves. Each of you will discover that the funding for the 1,400 children's social workers needed to ensure that maximum services are provided to children and families is sitting in plain view for all to see.

We are ready to resume contract negotiations to get a commitment from the Board of Supervisors on Children First. However, we are also compelled to report to the Commission that, per our contract, counsel representing SEIU Local 721 notified DCFS this week that it has repeatedly failed to comply with an arbitrator's rulings to reduce dangerously high caseloads for children's social workers in the Compton office. (Those workers sounded the alarm in 2011 that children were at risk.) Furthermore, an arbitrator has mandated a caseload reduction in additional sites; the 120-day period to remedy those violations expires in two weeks. These measures are necessary because the failure to act can mean the difference between life and death for children.

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<sup>1</sup> Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for the fiscal year ended June 30, 2012. Pg. 18 (38) (online at <http://ceo.lacounty.gov/PDF/CAFR%20FY%202012.pdf>).

<sup>2</sup> SEIU Local 721, *It's Time to Turn the Corner in Los Angeles County* (Apr. 16, 2013) (online at [www.seiu721.org/LACountyWhitePaper.pdf](http://www.seiu721.org/LACountyWhitePaper.pdf)).

We look forward to returning next month and pledge to assist the Commission in any way we can. We are grateful to the Commission for endeavoring to reform the nation's largest child welfare system, and we remain hopeful that your efforts will not be wasted. We invite you to call on us and community partners in our shared agenda to develop a new course of action so that we can ensure brighter futures for the children who are counting on us to keep them safe.

Sincerely,

Blanca Gomez, MSW, CSW, DCFS Corporate Office  
David Green, MSW, CSW, DCFS Metro North Office  
Almira Garza, CSW, Emergency Response Social Worker, Vermont Corridor Office  
Maria Garcia, CSW, Emergency Response Social Worker, Vermont Corridor Office  
Larry Golan, SCSW, Ongoing Services, Glendora

CC:

Hon. Gloria Molina  
Hon. Mark Ridley-Thomas  
Hon. Zev Yaroslavsky  
Hon. Don Knabe  
Hon. Michael D. Antonovich

Mr. Philip L. Browning, Director, DCFS